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SUBJECT: AFRO-COLOMBIAN CAUCUS FINDS IT DIFFICULT TO MAKE
ITS MARK

Classified By: Political Counselor John Creamer
Reasons 1.4 (b and d)

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) The Afro-Colombian Caucus, which consists of ten legislators from nine political parties, has five of its members investigated or jailed for alleged corruption or ties to illegal armed groups. The Caucus has succeeded in highlighting Afro-Colombian issues, but has not been effective in pushing a distinct, Afro-Colombian legislative agenda due to political, personal and regional differences. Afro-Colombian community groups remain lukewarm about the Caucus and are concerned over corruption allegations against its members. The Caucus was launched in October 2006 to boost Afro-Colombian political participation and promote Afro-Colombian rights. To date, it has received \$525,000 in USAID grants through the International Republican Institute (IRI) and the National Democratic Institute (NDI).End Summary

AFRO-COLOMBIAN CAUCUS OVERVIEW

¶2. (U) The Afro-Colombian Caucus consists of ten Afro-Colombian members of Congress (8 representatives and 2 senators--one of whom recently resigned his seat due to an on-going criminal investigation). Members represent a wide variety of regions, as well as nine different political parties, but share the goal of promoting Afro-Colombian rights and political participation. The Caucus was launched in October 2006 with support from the U.S. Congressional Black Caucus (CBC) and the International Republican Institute (IRI). It has an Executive Secretary, Cesar Garcia, and a Press Secretary, Harvey Murillo, and meets monthly to discuss the overall legislative agenda.

¶3. (U) Caucus members include:
--Maria Isabel Urrutia (Alianza Social Afrocolombiana) and Silfredo Morales (AFROUNINCA) who occupy the Special Afro-Colombian Seats in the House and are co-coordinators of the Caucus.
--Odin Sanchez (Partido de la U, Choco)
--Edgar Torres (Cambio Radical, Choco)
--Julio Gallardo (Conservative, San Andres)
--Alberto Gordon May (Partido Liberal, San Andres)
--Franklin Legro (Polo, Valle del Cauca)
--Hemel Hurtado Angulo (Convergencia Ciudadana, Valle del Cauca)
--Senator Rufino Cordoba (Colombia Democratica, Choco)
--Former-Senator Juan Carlos Martinez (Convergencia

Cuidadania, Valle de Cauca) who resigned from the Senate and Caucus on April 29, after the Supreme Court ordered him jailed for alleged ties to former-paramilitary leaders and drug traffickers in Valle del Cauca.

LEGISLATIVE AGENDA: NOT MUCH ACCOMPLISHED

14. (U) Despite its efforts, the Caucus has failed to gain passage of legislation or other initiatives to benefit the Afro-Colombian community. None of the three initiatives (two bills and one proposal to the GOC) advocated by the Caucus has advanced in Congress or been implemented by the Executive. The proposals include:

-- A Property Tax bill for the Collective Territories of Afro-Colombians that would require the GOC to reimburse municipalities with collective territories for the loss of revenue, because they do not collect taxes from those territories.

-- A proposal to amend the national budget to include earmarks for Afro-Colombians in departments with a large number of collective territories. This proposal is designed to ensure that a specific amount of the Departmental budgets goes to the development of the Afro-Colombian communities.

-- The No Racial Discrimination bill would criminalize ethnic and racial discrimination by adding a section to the Colombian Criminal Code to cover crimes against the "individual freedom, equality, and dignity of a person based on race, color of skin, national origin, ethnicity or culture."

15. (U) The Property Tax bill never passed the second debate in the House due to GOC opposition. Similarly, the Finance and Planning Ministries rejected the earmark proposal, saying the budget cost would be too high. Still, Caucus Secretary Garcia told us the group is considering taking legal action to demand the earmark proposal be revived, noting that the indigenous have an earmark for their collective territories or "resguardos." The No Racial Discrimination bill is waiting to be debated in the Senate after passing two debates in the House.

COMPLICATING FACTORS: TRYING TO DEFINE THE AFRO-COLOMBIAN

16. (U) The issue of racial identity has complicated political efforts, such as the Caucus, to organize the Afro-Colombian community. Leading academic Fernando Giraldo told us that many mixed race Colombians do not identify themselves as Afro-Colombian due to racial bias. Many Afro-Colombian activists believe this explains why the 2005 census, which relied on self-identification, estimated Afro-Colombians account for only 10.6% of the total population. These groups put the figure closer to 25%. Giraldo said racial bias also explains the small number of members in the Afro-Colombian Caucus. Political party leaders told us there are perhaps a dozen additional members of Congress who have some level of Afro descent, but who do not identify themselves as Afro-Colombian or are not interested in the Caucus' work.

17. (U) Political analysts say Afro-Colombians' diversity makes it hard to develop a common political agenda. There are four main Afro-Colombian groups: 1) "Raizales" from San Andres and Providence islands; 2) "Palenqueros" from the San Basilio de Palenque region in the Bolivar Department; 3) Afros on the Pacific coast (Choco, Valle, Cauca, and Narino departments); and, 4) urban Afro-Colombians in Bogota, Medellin, Cartagena and Cali. All have different political priorities and interests. Urban Afro-Colombians care more about jobs, while rural Afro-Colombians, especially on the Pacific coast, focus on the rights of collective territories.

Choco receives significant international attention because 80% of its population is Afro-Colombian (286,000), but the largest Afro population lives in Valle de Cauca (1.1 million). The World Bank estimates that due to migration and displacement, 66% of Afro-Colombians live in large urban areas.

POLITICAL BARRIER: THE LAW OF POLITICAL GROUPS

¶18. (U) The 2006 Law of Political Groups (Ley de Bancadas) adds an additional layer of complication to the Afro-Colombian Caucus. The Law requires all legislators to act and vote in coordination with their political party. Senate Secretary General Emilio Otero told us that this law means that any political grouping outside of political parties, such as the Afro-Colombian Caucus, can only function informally since members voting against their party could be subject to expulsion or loss of their seat. With Caucus members representing nine different political parties, Caucus members give priority to party politics rather than to Afro issues.

¶19. (SBU) Executive Secretary Garcia recognized that the Caucus' agenda had to be "chosen with tweezers," because of the diversity of political views among its members. The Caucus avoids most controversial issues, and instead focuses on issues, like racial discrimination, that directly affect Afro-Colombian communities. He said several Caucus members have tried to set up "Offices of Afro-Colombian Issues" within their parties to try to coordinate agendas between the Caucus and their parties.

INVESTIGATION OF CAUCUS MEMBERS UNDERMINES ITS CREDIBILITY

¶10. (SBU) The Caucus, like the rest of the Colombian Congress, has been subject to numerous investigations of its members for alleged ties to illegal armed groups or for corruption. Of its ten members, five are under investigation for possible ties to the National Liberation Army (ELN) terrorist group, former paramilitary groups, and drug traffickers. Several also face corruption charges. Former-Senator Juan Carlos Martinez resigned his seat on April 29 after he was jailed for alleged ties to former paramilitaries and drug trafficking organizations in Valle de Cauca. Martinez--a political kingmaker in Cali--reportedly maintained extensive ties with paras and drug traffickers.

¶11. (SBU) On April 17, the Supreme Court initiated preliminary investigations against Congressmen Sanchez and Torres for alleged ties with the former Elmer Cardenas block of the AUC. Sanchez and Torres were implicated by former AUC leader, Freddy Rendon Herrera (el Aleman). The two were already being investigated for alleged ties to the ELN after a demobilized ELN finance chief testified that the ELN had paid people to vote for them.

¶12. (U) Congressman Silfredo Morales is under investigation for misuse of funds and corruption committed when he was Mayor of Maria la Baja, Bolivar in 2000. Since March 5, he has been under house arrest and monitored via an electronic monitoring bracelet by the Ministry of Interior and Justice and Bureau of Prisons. Congressman Julio Gallardo is also being investigated by the Supreme Court for misuse of state funds.

AFRO COMMUNITIY GROUPS LUKEWARM ON CAUCUS

¶13. (C) Afro-Colombian activists have voiced concern that the various criminal investigations against Caucus members have undermined its credibility. Juan de Dios Mosquera, Director of Afro-Colombian advocacy group Cimmaron and a candidate for congress, told us Caucus members do not come from community organizations, but bought their seats through corruption and clientalist politics. Representative Herbierto Sanabria from Cali told us he is interested in Afro issues, but never considered joining the Caucus due to the spotty reputation of most of its members. Still, Maura Mosquera, President of Afrolider, a group that helps develop upcoming Afro-Colombian leaders, said the Caucus remains an important potential source of Afro-Colombian leaders.

US ASSISTANCE

¶14. (C) While USAID still financially supports the

Afro-Colombian Caucus through both NDI and the IRI, their public support has become much more low profile since the start of the investigations. NDI indirectly supports the Caucus by providing technical assistance to the two Afro-Colombian political parties headed by Maria Urrutia and Silfredo Morales (\$50,000 to date). IRI directly supports the Caucus by paying the salaries of the Executive and Press Secretary, funding consultants to provide technical assistance, and financing trips for members (\$475,000 to date). Whereas in 2006 and 2007 the Mission Director met monthly with the Caucus, now those meetings have become more irregular. In the last meeting between USAID Mission Director and three of the Caucus members on May 27, the members complained about the lack of support and threatened to complain to Congressman Gregory Meeks.

Brownfield